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A GROWING FORCE IN ART AND LETTERS

By ROBERT UNDERWOOD JOHNSON

ON the 16th and 17th of November of this year will occur the Eighth Annual Joint Meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and its parent institution, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the latter consisting of 250 members, fairly representative of letters, art and music, of whom fifty constitute the Academy. Although these institutions have separate organizations they are closely allied by similarity of general purpose, by their common participation in public sessions presenting literary work and musical compositions, and by the fact that the members of the Academy are recruited from the Institute, in which, moreover, they retain their membership and their interest. The dual body thus offers creative workers a double inducement to that excellent accomplishment which challenges the approval of their elders and comrades. Naturally, within the limitations of the smaller body, the older members and, in the main, the most prominent, are first chosen, but so rich is the Institute in workers of ability that a second Academy might easily be formed which would closely compete in achievement with the first. The two organizations are to share the same home and to co-operate in many of their activities.

In no sense of the word can the members be said to be self-chosen. The Institute was created by the American Social Science Association, which, under the presidency of Dr. Charles W. Eliot and the secretaryship of Mr. Frank B. Sanborn, met for many years at Saratoga. This action was taken in 1898 at the instance of Dr. H. Holbrook Curtis of New York and Prof. Simeon E. Baldwin of New Haven, and the Association selected the charter members, who promptly organized the Institute "with a view to the advancement of arts, music and literature," announcing the qualification of membership to be "notable achievement" in one of those professions. For six years, under the presidency of Charles Dudley Warner, William Dean Howells, Edmund Clarence Stedman and William M. Sloane, the Institute met and discussed questions of importance in its various fields at meetings of rare interest and delightful informality, with the result of closer acquaintance and mutual understanding among the representatives of the three professions. With the exception of a single formal paper, the speakers spoke from their seats with the ease and spontaneity of round table talk. On one memorable occasion Joseph Jefferson was the *clou* of the evening, with an address upon the Theatre, after which he responded to questions, which threw the theme into the battledore and shuttlecock of miscellaneous but not unorderly discussion.

About that time it was felt that the purposes of the Institute could be promoted by the creation of a more compact section, to be known as the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and, the action having been approved by the members, this unique plan of organization was adopted by resolution of April 23, 1904: Seven members were selected by ballot as the first members of the Academy, and were requested and empowered to choose eight other

members, and these fifteen to choose five others, and these twenty to choose ten more—the total of thirty constituting the Academy, as at first planned. The new body had already been empowered to elect its own officers, prescribe its own rules, the number of its members and the further condition of membership, provided that no one should be a member of the Academy who should not first have been on the list of regular members of the Institute, and that in the choice of members individual distinction and character and not the group to which they belong should be taken into consideration; and provided that all members of the Academy should be native or naturalized citizens of the United States.

The increase of the membership to fifty was thought to be desirable from the fact that three of the thirty—Messrs. Henry James, John S. Sargent and Edwin A. Abbey—were permanent residents of England and that others, by reason of illness or frequent absences, were likely to be unable to participate in the councils, which thus would have enlisted too small a number to be representative. The twenty were chosen at a single election and since that time each addition has been made by a majority of the total membership at the time. There are now two vacancies, caused by the death of Henry James and James Whitcomb Riley, and it is expected that these will be filled at the meeting of November 16. It is difficult to see how any fairer method of choice could be devised for the establishment of such an institution or for its perpetuation along the line of its announced purposes. To speak of it as a "self-constituted body" is to assume that there is some better agency to choose an Academy of writers, artists and composers than their peers and associates. Certainly a far less satisfactory result would be obtained were the choice to be left to Congress, to the press or to a referendum of the people. The main consideration to be kept in sight is that these men by experience and professional standing are particularly qualified to aid in the protection and furtherance of literature and the arts.

It was, indeed, to competent hands that the Institute entrusted the organization of the Academy when it chose by ballot the first seven members. They were William Dean Howells, who from the beginning has been president of the Academy, distinguished novelist, editor, and man-of-letters, writer of, probably, the most charming and suave prose of his day and country; Saint-Gaudens, our most considerable sculptor; Stedman, whose service to American literature, as poet and critic, places him next to Emerson and Lowell as an intellectual force; La Farge, distinguished for color and composition; Mark Twain, the most widely famous of our authors; John Hay, biographer of Lincoln and writer of beautiful English, and Edward MacDowell, preëminent among his countrymen as a composer. These are all names to excite the pride of Americans and the group were deeply impressed with the need of an American Academy. Their interest was unflagging; indeed, in the progressive selections of the first

thirty scarcely a ballot was missing. The total list* is fairly representative of American accomplishment, while the organization has been singularly free from jealousy, cliquishness and discord. If so distinguished and expert a body cannot avail itself of this opportunity, then nothing may be expected in the way of influence upon the national taste from an American Academy.

It would be an affectation of modesty to pretend that election to such a body is not an honor. John Hay said his selection by the Institute was the highest honor he had ever received. Mark Twain was so interested in maintaining the standard that he held that no man should be chosen except after opposition by a Devil's advocate. And yet no member is content that the Academy should be merely a roll of honor, though, even so, it would be a perpetual inspiration to good work. The keynote of its activity is service—service to the country through service to the important professions which it represents. It is asked and quite properly: What is the need of an Academy in this country, and what can such an institution do? The word is a very unsatisfactory one, being associated in many minds with a dull, cold, stiff, bloodless, ultra-conservative, pedantic view of life—with an unwillingness to leave a Greek accent slanting the wrong way in order to right a fallen man. But America has given a new interpretation to more than one European idea, and it is likely to do the same with the most admirable Old World concept of literary and artistic academies. In my judgment the American counterpart should retain the main principles of the older institutions: first, respect for scholarship and the best traditions and standards; secondly, maintenance of the dignity and insistence on the value of literature and the arts, and thirdly, realization that its authority must rest

*Following are the members of the Academy since its organization in 1904 in the order of their selection, deceased members being indicated by asterisks:

William Dean Howells, *Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *Edmund Clarence Stedman, *John La Farge, *Samuel Langhorne Clemens, *John Hay, *Edward MacDowell, *Henry James, *Charles Follen McKim, Henry Adams, *Charles Eliot Norton, *John Quincy Adams Ward, *Thomas Raynesford Lounsbury, Theodore Roosevelt, *Thomas Bailey Aldrich, *Joseph Jefferson, John Singer Sargent, *Richard Watson Gilder, *Horace Howard Furness, *John Bigelow, *Winslow Homer, *Carl Schurz, *Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Joel Chandler Harris, Daniel Chester French, John Burroughs, James Ford Rhodes, *Edwin Austin Abbey, Horatio William Parker, William Milligan Sloane, *Edward Everett Hale, Robert Underwood Johnson, George Washington Cable, *Daniel Coit Gilman, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Donald Grant Mitchell, Andrew Dickson White, Henry van Dyke, William Crary Brownell, Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve, *Julia Ward Howe, Woodrow Wilson, Arthur Twining Hadley, Henry Cabot Lodge, *Francis Hopkinson Smith, *Francis Marion Crawford, *Henry Charles Lea, Edwin Howland Blashfield, William Merritt Chase, Thomas Hastings, Hamilton Wright Mabie, *Bronson Howard, Brander Matthews, Thomas Nelson Page, Elihu Vedder, George Edward Woodberry, *William Vaughn Moody, Kenyon Cox, George Whitefield Chadwick, Abbott Handerson Thayer, *John Muir, *Charles Francis Adams, Henry Mills Alden, George de Forest Brush, William Rutherford Mead, *John White Alexander, Bliss Perry, *Francis Davis Millet, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, *James Whitcomb Riley, Nicholas Murray Butler, Paul Wayland Bartlett, *George Browne Post, Owen Wister, Herbert Adams, Augustus Thomas, Timothy Cole, Cass Gilbert, William Roscoe Thayer, Robert Grant, Frederick MacMonnies, Julian Alden Weir, William Gillette, Paul Elmer More, George Lockhart Rives.

Officers: President, Mr. Howells; Chancellor and Treasurer, Mr. Sloane; Permanent Secretary, Mr. Johnson, 70 Fifth Avenue, New York; Directors, Messrs. Blashfield, Brownell, Hastings, Howells, Johnson, Mead and Sloane.

on the experience and achievement of the members.

The element of authority must grow slowly: it cannot be forced. The Unitarian view of the inspiration of the Scriptures, that they are inspired as much as they strike us as being inspired—whatever one may think of it as a dogma—affords an apt parallel to the authority of the Academy. Whether its recognitions and pronouncements shall carry weight will depend upon the judgment of cultivated persons as to their reasonableness. For instance: upon the conclusion of Mr. Granville Barker's recent productions of Greek plays—a venture reputed to have been financially unsuccessful—the directors of the American Academy of Arts and Letters addressed to him a letter of appreciation, thanking him for the service he had rendered to the classical drama and to popular education. If there be any who think slightly of Mr. Barker's efforts, to such this recognition will carry no weight of authority. Mr. Barker, to whom it came as a "consolation prize," thought it well worth crossing the ocean to receive. Again, learning of the presence in New York of the distinguished Spanish-American lyric poet, Rubén Darío, the directors dispatched to him a letter of greeting and felicitation, which drew from him a grateful acknowledgment of the comradeship of art—a circumstance worth mentioning, because afterward a prominent journal, not knowing of this interchange of amenities, stated that the poet had been "ignored" by our men-of-letters. As time passes, and the prestige of the Academy is more widely established, a simple compliment of this sort will be as eagerly coveted as the crown of wild olive by the Greeks. It may even have prizes to administer. For the present, it must confine itself to such recognitions as I have cited and to the bestowal of its Gold Medal, recently designed by the sculptor Fraser, and awarded, for the first time, to Dr. Charles W. Eliot, for distinguished literary work. The Institute, also, has a beautiful medal of gold, the work of the sculptor Weinman, which has heretofore been annually awarded, the recipients being Augustus Saint-Gaudens in sculpture; James Ford Rhodes in history; James Whitcomb Riley in poetry; William Rutherford Mead in architecture; Augustus Thomas in drama; John Singer Sargent in painting, and William Dean Howells in fiction.

To be in this way a fount of honor is a prime function of such a responsible intellectual force as is represented by these two associations; but it is only a part of what is likely to be conceived to be the business of an American Academy. If it is to be a vital influence upon the country—and this is, indeed, the measure of its ambition—it will touch the life of the people at many points. It will not cheapen itself by impulsive or ill-considered public judgments, but, conserving its prestige, it will become a public asset as a sort of supplement to criticism, spreading abroad as well as it may "the best that is known or thought." It is not to be expected that it will be infallible either in the choice of members or in its verdicts. Happily, unlike a chain, a body thus constituted is stronger than its weakest point. No one, two or three persons likely to be included could impair the integrity of its corporate action. Moreover, it would be superior to the faults or defects of a few individual members. Nor would a failure to include a distinguished man now and then—

though this would be deplorable—permanently affect its influence, if, as a body, its decisions are wise.

Voltaire said that the French Academy was an institution of immense value even though it should do nothing. It is a continuous reminder that life is something besides war and commerce. Like Pan in Wall Street it brings to ordinary life the music of the spheres. But even the meagre official stipend of twelve hundred francs a year that goes to a French Academician does not imply a sinecure. One of that distinguished body told me of the herculean drudgery of the group charged with the preparation of the colossal dictionary; and there are more than two-score prizes to be awarded every year, fifty foundations to be administered, weekly meetings to be attended and many theses to be prepared for special occasions. The French Academy's influence may be summed up in the statement that it is the goal of every writer in France. It stands for style, good form, dignity and scholarship.

Eventually, the American organization is likely to have even more elaborate and comprehensive functions, because we have here so much that is undetermined and unprecipitated, and, perhaps, because we are more hospitable to new tendencies and movements. Its watchword should be conservative progress. The one fortress which cannot be given up to the wildest assaults of whim is the artistry that underlies literature, music and graphic and plastic creation. The Academy will mean nothing if it shall give any quarter to such fads as Cubism and Vers-Libre. If there be no principles of composition, then, indeed, let us burn our museums and start anew, backward to chaos!

To make a variation of Voltaire, the American Academy would be valuable even if, like the Hall of Fame, it were only a list of names. A simple recognition of one's colleagues is worth more to a writer than all the strenuous and vulgar promotion of the advertiser's transparent art, or all the piling up of immense editions. One fact alone would be an abundant excuse for the existence of the Academy, that, along with the Institute, it supplies a double incentive to good individual work. But there is large institutional work to be done if we are ever to have a national culture comparable to that of foreign countries. It is alien to the genius of this country that men should rest upon their laurels. Americans die in the harness.

Recently I made an inquiry into the professional activities of the members of the Academy. With the exception of two or three who were ill, I found that nearly every one was hard at work—the architects building, the sculptors modeling, the painters at their canvases, the composers making music, the poets singing, the historians recording, the novelists telling stories, and the wood-engraver at his highest point of excellence. Although several have passed the age of seventy, within two years and a half nearly every author has produced a new book, or edition, or other significant work, and some of them, two or three, or even, as in the case of Mr. Roosevelt, four volumes. The President of the United States, whose professional work has been interrupted for a few years, was striking off in speeches and State papers passages memorable for literary finish, suggestiveness and eloquence, while the heads of three of our large universities were daily conducting those literary enterprises, of such moment to the intel-

lectual life of the people. Say anything you please of these gentlemen of arts and letters except that they are idlers!

But in addition to their individual activities—and the best service an author or artist can do for the world is through personal creative work—it is felt that the Academy in its corporate capacity can do much that is sorely needed to be done, as, for instance, to put heart into those who now pursue or shall hereafter pursue, the paths of literature and the arts; to clarify the clouded sense of literary values and arrest certain vulgarizing and deteriorating tendencies. The romantic nonsense that "genius must starve" leaves out of account the conditions under which the best productions of the world have been made. To be sure, luxury has maimed and silenced some fine spirits, but for every one of these there are ten that have been benumbed by poverty. Peace of mind, and not worry about details of living, is the atmosphere in which experience grows into literature or art. I could to-day name a score of well-known and well-esteemed American writers or artists, who have not realized their potentialities for lack of a little larger margin of leisure or comfort, or, let us say, by reason of the galling harness or the inevitable necessities of life. To learn in sorrow what we teach in song is by no means disadvantageous, but to learn only in sorrow would be to restrict poetry to half its circumference. Writers need not riches, but opportunity, sympathy, inspiration, experience. Wisely administered, the Academy can aid in supplying these and in promoting those principles of every art that underlie permanent achievement.

I have intimated that the members of the Academy and Institute are interested in establishing our literature and art on a plane, not only of higher dignity but of broader service. Bacon's saying that every man is a debtor to his profession they long have cordially accepted, but their idealism goes further than a mere project to help one another. They identify the success of their craft with the progress of the country, the taste of which, it must be acknowledged, is sadly in need of guidance and stimulus. Mr. Robert W. de Forest, President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said two or three years ago that so far as art is concerned a large part of the United States is still in a condition of barbarism. Imaginative literature of a distinguished type is losing ground to the sensational, the trivial, the prosy, and the materialistic—all lacquered with the glitter of novelty. With the neglect of Greek and Latin, the treasures of the classics are falling into disrepute. Utilitarianism and vocational training, well enough in their place, have made us forget the true function of learning. We have many good poets, but even cultivated persons do not know who they are. Our own best literature has lost its hold upon the public, and an author's death is apt to mark the decline of his career. I hope that part of the service of these veterans of pen and brush and chisel will be to recall to the people the treasures of American prose and poetry that should be a source of national pride; to place many of the masterpieces of art that are now in our public or private galleries within the reach of the thirty-five States that have as yet no public art museums and to found, foster and aid such institutions; to cooperate with the colleges and universities and with the press in the

improvement of literary style; to aid the "spoken" theatre in its struggle for life against the moving-picture mania, and to encourage better diction on the stage; to lend the Academy's prestige to the spread of good taste in music and particularly to the cultivation of music in the home; to promote dignity, moderation and purity of expression in serious work; and in general, within the traditions of great literature and art, to stand for freedom of treatment, but against vulgarity, sensationalism, meretriciousness, lubricity and other forms of degeneracy, and against the tyranny of mere novelty.

Some dangers of academies of far-inherited tradition are not likely to threaten the one here so happily set on foot. It will never be political, religious, sectional or, it is to be hoped, narrow. Within its large range of professional principles it should cultivate a tolerant sympathy for distinguished performance. It should be a discoverer and encourager of genius. In the words of Sainte-Beuve, himself a French Academician, it should "refuse to be chained to inflexible dogma" and should aim to "attract to itself all superior talents from whatever source." It cannot be denied that the danger of such bodies is to become the haven of correct mediocrity. So far, the Academy has coveted individuality. Mark Twain can hardly be regarded as a model of style but his enormous vitality is a fine off-set to the polish of, for instance, John Hay,—both of whom, by the way, were deeply convinced of the need of an American Academy, though they might not have agreed with Mr. Henry Holt that "within our generation our literature has fallen to a lower level than it knew for generations before." It is impossible that in this country of intellectual and artistic brotherhood a new coefficient should not be given to the word "academic." The new institution, though it may well be proud of the recognition of other academies,* should not imitate them. It should be a rallying point for workers of isolated sympathies, supplying and provoking an *esprit de corps*, not of the labor union type. "It should be democratic, but should stand firmly on the conviction that knowledge and experience should guide," and it should uphold style as the soul, and form as the body, of all good creative work.

When all else has been considered, perhaps the chief service that may be accomplished by such a body of workers, animated by enthusiasm for their country and their art, will be to seek out, recognize and give opportunity to writers, artists, and com-

*The granting by Congress in April of a national charter to the Academy was the occasion of most cordial and gracious letters of felicitation from the Académie Française and the Académie des Beaux-Arts.

posers of exceptional talent. In this country everything is done for the average. The need is to give encouragement to the person of demonstrated force. Faguet says: "An original spirit strangled is a loss which is not compensated for by the rescue of ten fools from worse excesses of folly." That history is a record of great men is particularly true of literature and the arts.

Now how shall this and other activities be brought to realization? Obviously, only by the aid of persons of large means who have imagination to see the beneficent possibilities of such an institution. This is an age of lavish support of great public enterprises. Everything in America except creative art—the greatest glory of a country—is being heavily endowed; shall we have a great institution to promote that? Apropos of Mr. Archer Huntington's gift of a site for the home of the Academy and the Institute, and for which Messrs. McKim, Mead & White, with the cooperation of Mr. Hastings and Mr. Gilbert, have drawn alluring plans, the *Evening Post* has said: "The extraordinary development of the fine arts in America . . . makes it all the more worth while to have the future of these two societies assured, for they embody possibilities of immense usefulness to the nation." It is said that in Boston it is not respectable to die without leaving a bequest to Harvard University or the Museum of Art; the American Academy may come to occupy a similar place in the estimation of cultivated persons of large means. Financial support at this time is necessary because it affords the opportunity to build up the movement to the plane of prestige to which it is entitled by the achievements of its members, after which this prestige can be used to help all along the line. The value of a great institution, like the value of a great personality, lies in the potentiality of its influence. Our national ideals need to be firmly established and maintained on an intellectual plane. Hospitals and other remedial agencies are not to be underrated or neglected, and they are always sure of support, but we also need a revival of the gospel that the glory of man is his mind and his soul; and to remember that these, as well as the body, are exposed to starvation and dwarfing and disease and blindness. The fame of Mæcenas and Lorenzo de Medici and Richelieu rests mainly upon what they did for letters or the arts. A similar "immortality" awaits the man or woman, or the men and women, who shall seize the opportunity presented by these two distinguished bodies to maintain and stimulate the higher life of America, the watchword of which should be not "safety first" but "noblesse oblige."

Robert Underwood Johnson

